

Secular Fundamentalists

Can atheists form a movement around shared disbelief?

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER at the Crystal Clear Atheism Conference is making the audience uncomfortable: “It seems to me that we are consenting to be viewed as a cranky subculture,” warns Sam Harris, author of the anti-religion best-seller *The End of Faith*. “We don’t want to be viewed as a marginal interest group that meets in hotel ballrooms.” The Crowne Plaza crowd squirms, but Harris is undeterred.

“We should not call ourselves atheists,” he continues. “We should not call ourselves secularists. We should not call ourselves humanists, or secular humanists, or naturalists, or skeptics, or anti-theists, or rationalists, or freethinkers, or brights. We should not call ourselves anything.” Naming next year’s conference could be difficult.

Then again, there may not be a sequel if Harris has his way: “We should go under the radar—for the rest of our lives. And while there, we should be decent, responsible people who destroy bad ideas wherever we find them.”

That’s disheartening counsel for atheists who, after years of disbelieving alone, find themselves in the midst of a revival. Ninety percent of Americans claim to believe in God, church attendance is higher than in any other Western nation, and political leaders still invoke divine blessing at the end of major addresses. But in the past three years, six books touting atheism have reached the *New York Times*’s bestseller list. Features in *Newsweek*, a fawning *Nation* cover, and endless TV appearances followed.

Forty years after *Time* asked, “Is God Dead?” atheism is getting a new hearing. Its proponents are eminent—Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins, journalist Christopher Hitchens, philosopher Daniel Dennett—and its polemics are fierce: in the post-9/11 world, religion is no longer a fantasy to be ignored but a threat to be vanquished.

Grassroots unbelievers, newly emboldened, are forming lobbying groups and staging demonstrations, hoping to blend lonely cries to “*Écrasez l’infâme*” into a mighty chorus.

Like all movements, they hold conferences. But they didn’t gather to hear that atheists should “go under the radar.” Being part of a “cranky subculture” is half the fun.

Down the hall from the ballroom is a makeshift store selling books with screeching titles like *The God Delusion* and bumper stickers that read “Have you found Jesus? Don’t tell me he’s lost again” or “Abstinence Makes the Church Grow Fondlers.” Young men with haircuts fit for their mothers’ basements wear t-shirts that say “Don’t Pray in My School and I Won’t Think in Your Church.” The pleasure of sticking an evolved thumb in the eyes of the Ned Flanders of the world seems to be a primary attraction of atheism.

This gathering of Atheists Alliance International has everything a conference of the like-minded should: a fundraising dinner, a roster of celebrity authors (who will be signing their books), a little music, and films that fit the conference’s worldview. Instead of

“The Passion of the Christ,” this weekend features Monty Python’s “The Life of Brian” and the Dawkins-produced documentary on religion, “The Root of All Evil.” There are breakout sessions on the politics of the Religious Right, creationism, and “secular parenting.”

The atheists even have their own dippy hostess, Margaret Downey, president of AAI, who tosses out globe-shaped koosh balls to the audience. The shoulder pads of her suit inhibit her throwing, but nothing can restrain her smile. Her introduction is insistently cheerful: “Atheist Alliance International has gathered together speakers who are not only extraordinary in their respective fields but who exemplify the atheist life-stance.” A man close to me raises his eyebrows, “Life-stance?”

Moments of doubt are common, even among atheists. Harris’s keynote speech occasions many. Though he peppers it with the usual cribbed-from-Voltaire insults against the pious, his call to drop the words “atheist” and “secular” makes the audience visibly uncomfortable. He goes on to denounce the easy out non-believers take in treating all religion equally: “Christians often complain that atheists, and the secular world generally, balance every criticism of Muslim extremism with a mention of Christian extremism. Our Christian neighbors, even the craziest of them, are right to be outraged by this pretense of even-handedness because the truth is that Islam is quite a bit scarier and more culpable for needless human misery than Christianity has been for a very, very long

time. And the world must wake up to this fact.”

People came to be entertained with jokes about pedophile priests and to be encouraged in their moral struggle with prudes and prigs. Harris is gumming it all up with politics. Worse, to many it seems he’s sneaking religion in through the backdoor. “While I always use terms like ‘spiritual’ and ‘mystical’ in scare quotes, and take some pains to denude them of metaphysics,” he says, “the e-mail I receive from my brothers and sisters in arms suggests that many of you find my interest in these topics problematic.”

Harris suggests that atheists need to do better in the philosophy of life department. Pointing to contemplative traditions within those hated religions, he asks whether atheists can provide an account of human happiness “not contingent upon our merely reiterating our pleasures and successes and avoiding our pains.” He speculates about the mindset of someone who “holes himself up in a cave, or in a monastery, for months or years,” stating that many have improved their ethical intuition by these practices.

This sends a murmur through the crowd, and when Q & A time comes, Daniel Dennett stands up. He jokes that the case for intense contemplation would be more persuasive “if these people ever came back with something interesting.” The audience laughs, but Dennett ruins the light mood with a confession. He’s been experimenting with transcendental meditation in the Brook-Farm style. After only one night together, the leaders of unbelief are exposed as potential monks and mystics.

While Harris comes perilously close to validating the existence of religious experience, Hitchens embodies that older, more romantic, tradition of impiety that comes close to acknowledging the existence of God then raises its

fist—a finite gesture of rebellion against an infinite tyranny. He is a self-proclaimed “anti-theist.”

Hitchens entry into anti-religion polemics came in 1995, with the publication of his book on Mother Teresa, *The Missionary Position*. His latest foray into organized disbelief is the bestselling *god is not Great*. For Hitchens, religion is “a plagiarism of a plagiarism of a hearsay of a hearsay, of an illusion of an illusion, extending all the way back to a fabrication of a few non-events.” Tossing the crowd a little red meat—and being famous apart from his criticism of religion—makes Hitchens the conference rock star.

Out on the hotel balcony, a young man wearing a pinstriped jacket with a Union Jack sewn into the shoulder smokes a cigarette. Implying that there could be consequences if he reveals his name, he talks about his Bible-belt upbringing: “Down there the Baptists will even come to your door on Sunday and ask you to come to church with them.” Horrors. Pointing to his friend he notes, “Between

was coated in pink and torn apart.” Now he has found his footing in the uncreated world.

But apparently denying God’s existence doesn’t preclude idol worship: “I got to smoke with Christopher Hitchens! And talk about religion. He had to go to the bathroom and asked me if I would mind continuing the conversation while he went.” Beaming, he says, “it was probably the coolest moment of my life.”

For those convinced that atheism itself is becoming a religion, the conference provides plenty of evidence. It resembles an evangelical retreat weekend—and not just because the teens in attendance seemed thrilled with the prospect of little supervision and empty hotel rooms. Attendees are encouraged to vote on an appropriate symbol of atheism. They include versions of the letter A that look like the symbol for anarchy and a circle with the bizarre Greek formulation “atheos.” The same table displays pamphlets with quick arguments on behalf of the godless, helpful for reverse proselytism.

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the two of us, we couldn’t count 20 atheists in our school.” That public institution, he says, threatened him for giving a fellow student a copy of Dawkins’s *God Delusion*—“They said it could bring a lawsuit.” With some embarrassment, he reveals that, until a year ago, he was a fundamentalist Christian.

Then, all of 17, he took his copy of the Bible and attacked it with a highlighter: “I went through and marked every passage that contradicted science, or history or any other part of the Bible.” He kicks some ash by his feet. “By the end it

Just like evangelicals, atheists are anxious to give second careers to D-list celebrities. Julie Sweeney, a “Saturday Night Live” alum, is a monologist—not to be confused with monotheist—who has produced a dramatic soliloquy called “Letting Go of God.” She recounts dating a man who believed in Intelligent Design and thought that her eyes, the ones he so enjoyed gazing into, were created in heaven. A nice thought, she admits, before hectoring about evolution and how there are “flaws” in the human eye. I bet she’s fun on dates.

The unfaithful also seem determined to make the evangelical war on popular music (in the form of Christian rock) a two-front battle. Greydon Square is the stage name of the irreligious rapper, Eddie Collins. Hailing from Compton, Square assaults religion with an arsenal of West-Coast gangsta beats. His head swings forward and back: "I'm still the black Carl Sagan / Exposing the fraud of Christianity, that's all pagan." And his boasts don't end with comparing himself to scientists: "I'm the Malcolm X of Atheism / By any means necessary take it to 'em." In an apparent nod to authenticity, the Gandhi of impiety was recently detained by Arizona police.

If this kitsch falls short as an anti-apologetic, it's meant to. The *Guardian* commented, "The new atheists loathe

enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live. Certain beliefs place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion. ... There is, in fact, no talking to some people." The Inquisition at least allowed defendants the chance to recant—often many chances. But for Harris, in a nuclear age, the creeds of foreigners constitute an actionable threat. He keeps the Crusades but dumps St. Augustine and just-war theory in favor of the Bush doctrine.

The question of children preoccupies Richard Dawkins. Using a PowerPoint presentation, the Oxford don displays a photo that appeared around Christmas of three children. The caption designates them "a Christian," "a Jew," and "a Muslim." He changes the labels to "a

parent who might say, "They just do. I don't know. Now, how many times must I say it's bedtime"?

While Dawkins claims that religious parents "deny their children the universe," in another workshop the unbelievers work hard to make sure their kids deny anything beyond it. That can be a challenge. Julie Sweeney's contribution to the book *Parenting Beyond Belief* includes this vignette about her daughter: "One day we were walking home from the park with one of her friends, and the friend said, 'Did you see your grandfather's spirit fly up to heaven when he died?' And my daughter looked at me and said, 'Did it?' And I said, 'No, we don't believe in things like that.' And my daughter parroted me. ... And for a second she looked confident repeating me, and then her face crinkled up and she frowned and directed her eyes downward."

By the last day of the conference, the atheists seem to have run out of energy. There are no more entertainers or high-powered authors to see. While most of the impious search for coffee, a final workshop gears up: "How to Organize, Develop and Maintain an Atheist Meet-Up." Apparently, you can bring home the good times of nursing resentments against your churchgoing neighbors.

Atheism, the speakers assure this last audience, is a growth industry. A recent Pew Research Center survey found that 20 percent of 18 to 25 year olds reported no religious affiliation, up from 11 percent just 20 years ago. The continued unpopularity of Bush and the Religious Right expands the potential audience. There is hope, the atheists remind each other. But the enthusiasm seems forced.

It is Sunday, the day atheists stay in bed. They aren't used to being told to spread their message. In the fourth row, a man in a black t-shirt is slumped over, fighting the urge to sleep. ■

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religion too much to plausibly challenge it." CNN reported, "Their tone is overly confrontational rather than gently persuasive."

Harris admits that he advocates a kind of "conversational intolerance" whereby atheists challenge the faithful with pointed questions whenever they bring their unprovable metaphysics into conversation. Go out into the world and make annoyances. I worry what I might say if he sneezes in my presence.

By itself this isn't too troubling. But Harris argues that his brand of intolerance should be taken further. Much further. He writes in *The End of Faith*, "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them."

"This may seem an extraordinary claim," he continues, "but it merely

monetarist," "a Keynesian," and "a Marxist" in order to demonstrate that classifying children according to religion is some kind of abuse. Reductively, Dawkins believes religion to be a mere set of mental propositions, not a way of life that can begin sacramentally soon after birth. Until Hayekians perform rituals on children, it's safe to call this reasoning tendentious.

He further argues that religion kills curiosity in children. The owl-faced biologist says it takes away questions like why do the feathers of an eagle's wing look spread as they fly? For all his familiarity with the natural world, Dawkins seems to be ignorant of religious people as a species. Can he find a Christian parent who would answer that question by saying, "God did it. Now get ready for the rapture"? Can he not find an atheist

Looking for Mr. Right

“I was conservative yesterday, I’m a conservative today and I will be a conservative tomorrow,” declared Fred Thompson to the Conservative Party of New York,

billing himself as the “consistent conservative” in the GOP race—in contrast to ex-mayor Rudy Giuliani.

In his defense, Rudy cites George Will as calling his eight years in office in the Big Apple the most conservative city government in 50 years.

Truth be told, Thompson was reliably conservative in his Senate years. But so, too, has John McCain been, and Ron Paul, Duncan Hunter, and Tom Tancredo. Hunter, however, splits with Thompson and McCain on trade. Paul disagrees with all six of them on the war. And Tancredo assails McCain for backing Bush’s amnesty for 12-20 million illegal aliens.

Will the real conservative please stand up? Or perhaps we should recall John 14:2, “In my father’s house there are many mansions.”

Sixty years ago, Robert A. Taft was the gold standard. Forty years ago, it was Barry Goldwater who backed Bob Taft against Ike at the 1952 convention. Twenty years ago, it was Ronald Reagan who backed Barry in 1964. Reagan remains the paragon for the consistency of his convictions, the success of his presidency, and the character he exhibited to the end of his life. About Reagan the cliché was true. The greatness of the office found out the greatness in the man.

Reagan defined conservatism for his time. And the issues upon which we agreed were anti-Communism, a national defense second to none, lower tax rates to unleash the engines of economic progress, fiscal responsibility, a strict-constructionist Supreme Court,

law and order, the right to life from conception on, and a resolute defense of family values under assault from the cultural revolution that hit America with hurricane force in the 1960s.

With the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the breakup of the Soviet Union, anti-communism as the defining and unifying issue of the Right was gone. The conservative crack-up commenced.

With George H.W. Bush came the advent of what Fred Barnes, then of *The New Republic*, hailed as Big Government Conservatism. Some thought the phrase oxymoronic. But when Bush stood at the rostrum of the UN General Assembly in October 1991 to declare that America’s cause was the creation of a New World Order, the Old Right reached reflexively for their revolvers.

In 1992, with foreign policy off the table, the Bush economic record a perceived failure, and Ross Perot running on protectionism and populism, Bush refused to play his trump card with the Clintons: the social and moral issues he and Lee Atwater had used to beat poor Dukakis senseless in 1988. And so, George H.W. Bush lost the presidency.

Now 15 years later, what does it mean to be a conservative?

There is no Pope who speaks *ex cathedra*. There is no Bible to consult like Goldwater’s *Conscience of a Conservative* or Reagan’s “no-pale-pastels” platform of 1980. At San Diego in 1996, Bob Dole told his convention he had not bothered to read the platform. Many who heard him did not bother to vote for Bob Dole.

Today, the once great house of con-

servatism is a Tower of Babel. We are Big Government and small government, traditionalist and libertarian, tax-cutter and budget hawk, free trader and economic nationalist. Bush and McCain support amnesty and a “path to citizenship” for illegals. The country wants the laws enforced and a fence on the border.

And Rudy? A McGovernite in 1972, he boasted in the campaign of 1993 that he would “rekindle the Rockefeller, Javits, Lefkowitz tradition” of New York’s GOP and “produce the kind of change New York City saw with ... John Lindsay.” He ran on the Liberal Party line and supported Mario Cuomo in 1994.

Pro-abortion, anti-gun, again and again he strutted up Fifth Avenue in the June Gay Pride parade and turned the Big Apple into a sanctuary city for illegal aliens. While Ward Connerly goes state to state to end reverse discrimination, Rudy is an affirmative-action man.

Gravitating now to Rudy’s camp are those inveterate opportunists, the neo-cons, who see in Giuliani their last hope of redemption for their cakewalk war and their best hope for a renewed struggle against “Islamofascism.”

I will, Rudy promises, nominate Scalias. Only one more may be needed to overturn *Roe*. And I will keep Hillary out of the White House.

A Giuliani presidency would represent the return and final triumph of the Republicanism that conservatives went into politics to purge from power. A Giuliani presidency would represent repudiation by the party of the moral, social, and cultural content that, with anti-communism, once separated it from liberal Democrats and defined it as an institution.

Rudy offers the Right the ultimate Faustian bargain: retention of power at the price of one’s soul. ■